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Refugee solidarity in the everyday

Brexit means Brexit means go home. That seems to be the dominant message of the new conservative government under Theresa May, which is reinforcing this interpretation with a stream of proposed policies that range from the requirement that employers list foreign workers, to passport checks on pregnant women in maternity hospitals, and changes to the school census that require the collection of data on pupils' country of birth and nationality. None of this should really come as a surprise: Theresa May as Home Secretary focused on creating a 'hostile environment' for irregular immigration, as characterised by the dog-whistling politics of campaigns such as the notorious Go Home vans. A rampant xenophobia in both pre- and post-Brexit UK has focused on immigration as the main social, cultural and economic threat to all aspects of British life. There has been an increase in post-Brexit racism, hate crimes and street hostility, particularly against Eastern European nationals but also against BME people, especially in England. People are being targeted for looking and sounding 'foreign' (a side effect of which is that notions of whiteness are becoming unsettled by processes of racialisation not seen in the UK for decades).

The 'immigration question' plays out quite differently north and south of the border. In the independence referendum of 2014 immigrants in Scotland had the right to vote, and played a role as 'privileged stakeholders' (unlike in the Europe referendum, or general election). And immigration simply did not feature in the independence debates: the dominant story was about the sovereignty of the pound and the economy. Moreover, in Scotland the cataclysmic concerns around immigration that were such a feature of the Euroreferendum in England failed to garner support; instead the need for immigration was recognised and emphasised, as a way of shoring up the Scottish economy and boosting skills, especially in the north east and remote rural areas. This is a tale of two referendums: the independence referendum in Scotland was empowering, and immigrants were active participants, while the Brexit referendum south of the border was vilifying, and turned immigrants into passive 'bystanders' and objects of political debate. The UKIP-led anti-immigration turn that has been co-opted by Westminster politics was nowhere near as intense in Scotland; the issue simply failed to have the same salience with the Scottish electorate, where every region returned a remain majority.

Brexit did not occur in a political vacuum. In May, at the height of the referendum campaign, the UK government passed into law the Immigration Act 2016, arguably the UK's most regressive and punitive legislation on immigration to date, but there was very little public protest at its draconian measures. At the same time, paradoxically, a groundswell of support for refugees was growing across the UK and Europe, in response to the humanitarian crisis along the 'migrant trail' from the Middle East to Calais. This mainly took the form of a DIY 'refugees welcome' solidarity movement, which has centred on various forms of direct action: hundreds of people loaded cars and vans with supplies for makeshift refugee camps, to help for a few days or even months; there were many fundraising activities for people on this trail; and there were lobbies and public demonstrations of support. Curiously, this

movement remains for the large part strangely disconnected from the conditions of asylum seekers and refugees already 'here' in the UK. This disconnect is an interesting anomaly and raises, to my mind, the issue of hierarchies of 'refugeeness', framed around which refugee (and for that matter asylum seeker and migrant) lives matter most. In order to effect meaningful structural change the 'refugees welcome' solidarity must extend to people already seeking asylum in the UK, and take into account the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers who have been racialised as undeserving 'economic migrants'. Recent solidarity actions in Glasgow suggest a way of thinking through this.

Glasgow has a long tradition of asylum advocacy and mobilisation, particularly after 2000, when the government instituted its policy of distributing asylum seekers across the country, and the city became the largest dispersal site in the UK. Examples of powerful DIY activism include activism against dawn raids in dispersal neighbourhoods across the city; the famous 'Glasgow Girls' campaign at Drumchapel High School on behalf of their disappearing fellow students; the Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees; and the Unity Centre, which gives practical support and solidarity to all asylum seekers and other migrants in Scotland. These have resulted in substantial changes to the treatment of asylum seekers in Scotland, including an end to dawn raids and an amnesty that means young people who are studying cannot be detained.

'Domopolitics' is a useful concept in thinking about xenophobia. It refers to an ideology that sees the state as a home (in contrast to classical liberalism's metaphor of the economy as a household), thereby setting up an opposition between the domestic and the international, and encouraging a view of the state as a closed secure space, with guests by invitation only, and doors locked at night. It also has a second articulation: one where 'incomers' have to be filtered, screened, controlled and domesticated, and this is rationalised as a series of necessary security measures in the name of a particular conception of home.¹ In the early years of dispersal this logic of 'domopolitics' prevailed in Glasgow. But support for asylum seekers grew out of everyday encounters in new places of home between dispersed asylum seekers and 'locals'. Over time, the high-rise flats that embodied this logic of protecting 'our resources' from the uninvited other produced important spaces for everyday encounters at bus-stops, post offices, local shops, schools and churches, all of which are vital to the creation of social connections, sharing of knowledge and practices of rooting in. The physicality of the dispersal neighbourhoods engendered this process: the social geography of asylum brought about a kind of 'thrown-togetherness', different people sharing local spaces and experiencing everyday encounters. In these new patterns and places of belonging, locals and newly settling residents began to mirror each other: 'us', 'we', 'our home', 'just like us', 'we belong', 'we are from here'. Solidarity through thrown-togetherness in the everyday was embedded in an understanding of home that interrupts the domopolitical; that suggests a notion of home that extends beyond citizenship, territory and security.

Since the mid- to late-2000s much has changed: Glasgow City Council's demolition programme has largely targeted the high-rise flats of the dispersal areas, decanting and relocating many to new areas. Demolition has meant not only the disappearance of buildings, but also the points of everyday encounters where the social is produced and reproduced. Moreover, in today's political context of austerity and local material

decline, in the face of fear of the ever more present migrant other, a logic of domopolitics seems to be increasingly understood as common sense. Amidst all of this, we need new points of interruption, new forms of everyday encounter to challenge everyday bordering, which might translate into a positive political and civic response here in the UK.²

One project that has emerged from the 'refugees welcome' solidarity movement and performs an important bridging function between refugees 'there' and 'here' is 'Refuweegee' (a play on a slang term for a Glaswegian - symbolising the forging of being 'new' with being 'native'). The project organises a number of activities, including providing new arrivals with community-built essentials pack; a 'letters fae the locals' writing campaign to encourage messages of friendship and welcome and connections between people; and fundraising and awareness promoting work. Refuweegee and its precursors in the Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees and anti-dawn raid activism have in common their DIY-ness; their focus on practical support for asylum seekers in the city; their work on advocacy for change; and their message of friendship across difference. They are founded on principles of sameness and difference and offer a conceptualisation of being in Glasgow that is framed around a 'city identity'. They represent acts of interruption to the domopolitical discourses of belonging that dominate in the UK in policy, legislation and public mood.

What takes Refuweegee beyond the limits of much 'refugees welcome' solidarity is its bridging function; it connects with asylum seekers 'here', and confronts everyday bordering through the re-making of everyday encounters with others already 'here'. At its heart are efforts to make processes of cohabitation and interaction an ordinary feature of urban multiculturalism in Glasgow, reaching beyond home and belonging as defined by citizenship and immigration status.

Refuweegee should not, however, be used to consolidate the myth that there is no racism in Scotland (Satnam Virdee discussed this illusion in *Soundings* 62). It is not a refugee-ified retelling of the story that 'We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns'. Racism is part of Scotland's past and present, and a focus on post-Brexit racism as a new phenomenon risks erasing people's long endured experiences of, and resistance to, everyday and institutionalised racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. You don't have to travel far to hear stories lamenting the declining neighbourhood, austerity nostalgia for a bygone era, and the transformation of the city as a whole; and the Commonwealth Games, gentrification and the demolished high-rise flats all feature in those stories. Migration also features strongly in these tales of the transformed city. These stories forge meaning in everyday life, and reflect how differences and changes are talked about at a micro level. As a result, stories of domopolitics circulate as a common sense of our time.

One way of countering this is to scaffold solidarity around an idea of a new hybrid identity - as Refuweegee does. Refuweegee can be seen as a part of an 'our area' semantic system, which Les Back has identified as one that allows for acknowledgement and rejection of difference, thus providing a powerful means of producing solidarity across difference: our area, our city, *we're all fae somewhere* ... But central to this latest incarnation of grass roots activism is the connecting of 'there' and 'here' together in innovative and interesting ways. This bridging approach, I

suggest, is vital in providing one way through the anomalies of Brexit and immigration, and offers an alternative logic that can become part of a wider story about home. And, in the tradition of Glaswegian asylum advocacy and activism, it is important to think of these kinds of activism as offering resources of hope, and as moments of interruption, and of disturbance and resistance: they offer ways of being political and contesting belonging on the basis of citizenship, home and territory.

Notes

1. W. Walters, 'Secure Borders, Safe Haven, Domopolitics', *Citizenship Studies*, 8(3), 2004.
2. For more on every day borders see Don Flynn, 'Frontier anxiety: living with the stress of the every-day border', *Soundings* 61, winter 2015.